U.S. Envronmental Protection Agency
Office of Solid Waste

Background Press Information
EPA's Recycling Goal

Recycling of Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) in the US grew from 9.6 percent in 1980 to 16.2 percent in 1990. By 1996, the recycling rate for MSW was 27.4 percent. From 1990 to 1996 the MSW average annual increase in the MSW recycling rate was almost 2 percent per year! From 1996 to 1998, the MSW recycling rate increased .8 percent to 28.2 percent, an average annual increase of .4 percent. Reaching the agency's goal of 35 percent by 2005 would require annual average increases of about 1 percent. Does the Agency think the MSW recycling goal of 35 percent can-or should- be reached?

Recycling goal of 35 percent by 2005, Is it worth it?

EPA supports reaching a goal of 35 percent recycling by 2005. The benefits are clear– greater energy savings, less impact on global warming, less landfill space used, greater value of materials salvaged. The US is increasingly dependent on recycling with 67 percent of the steel industry fed by scrap steel, 42 percent of the aluminum industry fed by scrap aluminum, and 38 percent of the paper industry fed by secondary fiber.

Can it be done?

Some local communities have reached waste reduction levels of 40 to 65 percent through composting organic materials, improving collection efficiency, using pay as you throw, tapping a wide range of materials for recovery, encouraging citizen involvement by making participation convenient, offering service to multi-family dwellings, and augmenting curbside collection with drop off collection. Participation from institutions and commercial establishments was encouraged by providing waste audits, listing drop off sites and recycling services, publicizing marketing options for secondary materials, accepting materials at public processing centers, providing municipal pick up of a wide range of commercial/institutional recyclables and/or convenient drop off sites

Of course, recycling requires a dynamic partnership between industry, government, and consumers. Municipal government cannot do it all alone. Getting to higher levels of recycling requires commitments from industry such as designing for recycling, making markets for secondary materials, and buying recycled products.

Can local governments afford it?

Dover, New Hampshire increased waste reduction from 3 percent in 1990 to 52 percent in 1996 while cutting cost per household from $122 in 1990 to $73 per household in 1996. Seattle, Washington increased waste reduction from 19 percent in 1987 to 49 percent in 1996 while holding cost per household constant at $155. Portland, Oregon increased waste reduction from 29 percent in 1992 to 40 percent in 1996 while decreasing cost per household from $241 in 1992 to $211 in 1996. Falls Church, Virginia increased waste reduction from 39 percent in 1990 to 65 percent in

1996 while cutting cost per household from $372 to $215. Perhaps the question should be whether communities can afford not to look closely at increasing waste reduction levels.

Where are the targets of opportunity?

EPA estimated an annual savings to local governments of $1.3 billion over traditional disposal methods from better management of 62 million tons of organic waste nationally. These methods included grasscycling, backyard composting, on-site institutional composting, yard trimmings composting and commercial waste composting. Organic materials included yard trimmings, food scraps, and contaminated paper. For example, of 22 million tons of food scraps generated in the US in 1998, about a half a million tons, or 2.6 percent, was composted.